

Canadian Eh*

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A pervasive feature of Canadian English, at least in many regions of Canada, is the use of the interrogative particle eh as a tag on sentences like, 'Nice weather, eh?' or 'So you're a Canadian, eh?'. Judging by my own dialect (Southern Ontario), this particle is largely restricted to an informal speaking style, but there its presence is almost compulsive. In this paper, I want to comment on the functions of this particle in conversation, and the distributional restraints on it which derive from these functions.

At first sight, it would seem that eh is merely a typical expression of the Canadian's familiar lack of self-confidence and self-esteem. However, some months of observation have convinced me that friendliness, rather than uncertainty, is the basic emotion conveyed through this particle. My conclusion is based partly on the fact that the friendlier a conversation is, and the more a conversation aims at expressing group solidarity, the more eh seems to crop up. In these situations, people generally have no reason to feel insecure about their acceptance (they are, after all, 'at home'), but they do have reason to seek mutual reaffirmation of their friendly feelings. This need can be an expression of personal insecurity, but more often it involves plain old folksiness.

To understand how eh conveys this friendly, folksy manner, it is necessary to consider its use in relation to the various kinds of speech acts performed by the sentences in which it occurs. The current linguistic notion of a speech act derives from the philosophy of J. L. Austin.¹ Austin showed that languages provide means not only for making assertions about the world that are true or false, but also for performing various kinds of actions which are not true or false, but rather properly or improperly performed. For example, if someone says, 'I promise to loan you my car tomorrow night', he is not making a statement about a promise but is making the promise itself. That is, by the mere saying of a few appropriate words, it is possible to execute a wide variety of actions (or speech acts), including thinking, apologizing, marrying, requesting, commanding, congratulating, and so on.

Suppose now that someone said, 'I promise to loan you my car', but that person was known not to possess a car. His statement cannot be called false, but there is clearly something drastically wrong with it. A basic condition on valid promising is that a person is capable of doing what he promises to do, and in the case described, this is clearly not possible. The act of promising is therefore void, because a condition on its correct performance has been violated. Every speech act has associated with it a set of such conditions which must be met

in order for the speech act to be validly, or, to use the technical term, feliculously performed. For example, a speaker can only be said to have made a promise to do X if that person can do X, intends to do X, and knows (or strongly believes) that the addressee wants him to do X. An example of an infelicitous promise was given above. Another infelicitous speech act would be saying, 'I congratulate you', to someone who has not recently distinguished himself by any accomplishment in life.

Although some speech acts are conveyed by explicit performative verbs such as promise, congratulate, apologize, and so on, it more often happens that an act is conveyed without explicitly mentioning what the act is. For example, if someone says, 'Why not move to Vancouver?', he has made a suggestion, even though he has not begun by saying, 'I suggest that...'. This is a basic fact about language, which turns out to be crucial in understanding how and why a particle such as eh works. Very often in human language, a speaker does not make his intentions fully explicit, but lets the situation, the tone of voice, and so on indicate much of what he wants to convey. Imperatives, for example, constitute a class of utterances within which there is a wide range of variation, according to the context in which they occur. For example, the sentence, 'Wash the dishes' can express a high-handed command or a reasonably polite request, depending upon the relations between speaker and addressee, the style of delivery, and so on. We could say that 'Wash the dishes' is pragmatically ambiguous, because we do not know whether it conveys a command or a request until we know the context in which it was uttered.²

Suppose the imperative sentence had been, 'Wash the dishes, eh?'. This revised version could no longer convey a command, because it solicits the addressee's point of view. It is a basic condition on requesting that the addressee is offered the option of declining, whereas when a command is given, obedience is expected regardless of the addressee's preferences. Eh questions whether conditions were right for the addressee to comply with the foregoing speech act, and such a question is compatible only with an act of requesting and not commanding.

There are quite a number of other ways of showing in English that you are making a request rather than giving a command. For example, you can ask a question which implies a request, without directly stating it.³ Some question forms are so commonly used in this way that they can be automatically recognized as requests, and the politeness marker please can be used with them. For example, 'Can you (please) wash the dishes?', 'Would you (please) wash the dishes?', 'Will you (please) wash the dishes?', and so on. These forms differ only stylistically from the sentence, 'Wash the dishes, eh?', but not in terms of the speech act performed. That is, the request with eh is a more simple and direct locution, which makes it suitable to the most informal level of style. The great advantage of using eh to disambiguate requests from commands is that it allows the speaker to accomplish this goal without resorting to a more elaborate conversational device than a simple imperative form.

My general claim concerning the function of eh, then, is that it questions whether the conditions were right for the felicitous performance

of the speech act which it tags. Eh indicates that the situational assumptions associated with a particular speech act are weak and subject to evaluation by the addressee. Speech acts requiring strong situational assumptions cannot tolerate the use of eh, because the act itself is vitiated by such a conversational move. In order to use certain 'strong' speech acts, a speaker must be certain that the situation is right for them. For example, a person cannot give a command unless he knows that he has authority over his addressee and that the addressee is obliged to comply. To question this set of assumptions is to destroy the act of commanding. An army sergeant would never say, 'Forward, march, eh?'

Looked at from a somewhat different angle, eh is compatible with every broad category of speech act types,⁴ but it is only compatible with certain subtypes within each category. These subtypes are themselves a natural class (of speech acts), since they are the class of actions which can be felicitously performed even when the speaker is uncertain whether all conditions have been ideally met. (It is possible, for example, to venture a request even when you are not certain that the addressee will be able or willing to comply.) The presence of eh signals that the speaker is making only weak assumptions about the possibility of the addressee's compliance. Eh leaves the door open for a different point of view to be expressed, and does so without resorting to a more complex device which might elevate and formalize the tone of a conversation unnecessarily.

We have seen how eh can distinguish a request from a command. This particle also distinguishes offers from promises,⁵ and imperious suggestions from nonimperious ones. Promises differ from offers in the speaker's confident assumption that his addressee wants the thing that is being promised. When someone makes an offer, however, he does not presume to know his addressee's desires, but leaves open the option of declining if it turns out that his offer is not acceptable. A sentence such as 'I'll cook supper' can express a promise or an offer, depending on the situation, but 'I'll cook supper, eh?' can only be an offer.

Similarly, 'Let's climb the CN Tower' could be an imperious suggestion that anticipates no objections, but the corresponding sentence, 'Let's climb the CN Tower, eh?', explicitly solicits the addressee's opinion.⁶ The assumption that goes along with making a suggestion (at least, making a friendly one) is that the content of the suggestion expresses a worthwhile project which the addressee will like but is free to reject. Obviously, this assumption can be held quite tentatively without preventing a suggestion from actually being made. By questioning whether it does hold, the speaker thus makes it clear that he does not intend to impose his views aggressively, and this makes his suggestion a friendlier action.

The use of eh with questions is, to a linguist, a surprising fact, since other interrogative tags are barred from this environment. For example, it is impossible to say, 'Where did he go, o.k.?', or 'Where did he go, didn't he?', but many Canadians will say things like 'Where did he go, eh?'. However, if my analysis of the function of eh is correct, this is a natural extension of its use. When someone asks a question, he is assuming (at least) that his addressee knows the

answer and that he will be willing to give it. Again, these assumptions can be held in a weak form without making it impossible to ask a question at all. In fact, it is friendlier to indicate that they are only tentative assumptions, since this leaves the addressee the option of declining to answer without feeling that he has affronted some standing claim on his good will.

Earlier in this paper, I drew a distinction between sentences used to perform various kinds of actions, and sentences which express true or false propositions about the world. Actually, the latter type of sentence can also be viewed as performing a kind of speech act--namely, an act of asserting. There are a great many subtypes within the category of assertions. These include acts of informing, reminding, accusing, warning, announcing, hinting, explaining, and so on. Again, we find that eh is compatible only with those acts of asserting that are consistent with weak situational assumptions. The relevant assumptions in this category are, first, whether the speaker knows that what he is saying is true, and second, whether the addressee knows what the speaker knows before it is asserted to him. If one or both of these conditions fails, the speaker has not accomplished an act of informing. For example, you cannot inform someone of the score of a hockey game by saying, 'Leafs 3, Bruins 0, eh?', because eh signals to the listener that you might be wrong, so he can't believe that the score was what you said it was on the strength of your assertion.

Direct compliments, insults, and accusations are all strong forms of assertions, because they do not allow a speaker to be uncertain about his facts and defer to the addressee's judgment on them. It is no compliment to say to someone, 'You're the sexiest man in the room, eh?', because the assertion invites the addressee to show how egotistical he is by agreeing. Similarly, to insult someone by saying, 'You're a real stinker, eh?', is a much diluted insult, because it leaves the door open for discussion.⁷ A sentence such as 'You stole my Maple Leaf pin, eh?', is likewise a very weak accusation, because if the speaker is sincerely accusing, he must be convinced that his claim is true, although the addressee is not likely to want to admit it. Eh with an accusation merely encourages denial, which is opposite to the intent of the accusation.

Other types of assertions do not require such strong situational assumptions in order to be carried off successfully. For example, an assertion may be intended only to remind an addressee about something he already knows, or to advance some hypothesis which the speaker only tentatively believes and which the addressee is capable of evaluating. For example, it is often worthwhile to warn someone about some difficulty which he is already aware of, as a means of reinforcing his awareness. But at the same time, the person might take offense if he feels that he is being 'informed' of something that he already knows, as if he had been too slow to grasp it previously. Therefore, it is diplomatic for a speaker to make explicit that he realizes that he is recalling shared information, not stating something new. He can do this by tagging his assertion with eh. Here, eh invites the addressee to evaluate whether the content of the warning was true, whether it pointed to a real danger, and so on. Eh indicates that the speaker believes that the addressee is in an equal position to make these kinds of judgments.

Another very common use of eh is to tag expressions of a personal opinion, such as 'Nice weather, eh?', 'That was a great concert, eh?', or 'What a gorgeous Mountie, eh?'. In this case, the speaker expresses his opinion along with the expectation that it will turn out to be shared by the addressee, but he is not presenting some fact about the world which the addressee ought to believe. This use of eh requires that the addressee be in a position to form his own opinion on the topic, before hearing someone else's. You don't say 'What a gorgeous Mountie, eh?', to someone who can't see the Mountie for himself.

Eh can solicit confirmation of facts as well as opinions, if a speaker is uncertain about them and is deferring to the superior knowledge of his addressee. For example, someone might say, 'The meeting begins at 4 o'clock, eh?'. This differs from a regular question by the fact that the speaker indicates that he tentatively believes what he has asserted (questions convey no such information), but is prepared to revise his beliefs if corrected by his addressee. This is a somewhat different situation from soliciting confirmation of an opinion. In the latter case, you are interested in knowing if the other person agrees, but if he doesn't, you may still keep to your own ideas.

One frequent use of eh in conversation is to get confirmation of a shared belief, before drawing some further inference from it. For example, 'He's a very old man, eh?'. So you can't expect him to do everything for himself'. This is a very useful device, because it draws the listener at least to the halfway mark in an argument, before springing what the speaker sees as the logical conclusion. Eh can also be used strategically in a conversation to slip in some point of view advantageous to the speaker, as if it were already shared knowledge between speaker and addressee. For example, someone might say, 'There was nothing more I could do under the circumstances, eh?'. Since the use of eh is so automatic among many Canadians, no overt reply is usually given or expected. Thus, the person who hears the above sentence is forced to choose between saying nothing (which indicates assent) or breaking the flow of conversation by openly dissenting, something people are generally unwilling to do without strong motivation.

Some Canadians extend these uses of eh so liberally in their narrative style, that virtually every sentence in a story is treated as if it were shared information and the addressee need only keep up with the logical development of the piece. An example of such a description: 'He's holding on to a firehose, eh? The thing is jumping all over the place, eh, and he can hardly hold onto it, eh? Well, he finally loses control of it, eh, and the water knocks down half a dozen bystanders.' (quoted by Avis 1972 103; source not given. As Avis points out, in this context, eh frequently has a level rather than rising intonation). This narrative technique provides at least one example of the hyperdefensive use of eh, because the speaker here seems to be anticipating at every turn a challenge to the accuracy or plausibility of his story, even from people who are not in a position to do so with much authority.

To summarize what I have said with respect to eh with assertions: the use of eh in this category of speech acts serves to distinguish those assertions whose content is informational from those whose content is assumed to be shared knowledge, subject to revision by the addressee. This is consistent with other uses of eh, since assertions which are acts of informing are simply those with strong situational assumptions which cannot be questioned without voiding the act altogether. This analysis is also consistent with the basic friendliness of eh, because its presence avoids giving the impression that one is 'informing' someone of something which, given the total situation, he ought to have known.

The general conversational function of eh, therefore, is to question the situational assumptions associated with different speech acts, thereby showing that these assumptions are held in a weak rather than a strong form. In this way, a speaker can avoid an attitude of officiousness and at the same time avoid unfriendly formality. This interpretation of eh fits well with Canadians' general conception of themselves as a rather cautious, rather retiring, but basically good-hearted nation. We are not afraid to form and express our own point of view, we just don't like to force it too much on other people.

Eh?

Footnotes

*pronounced [e:], with rising intonation. This paper has been slanted toward a non-technical, Canadian audience.

I would like to thank the many relatives, friends, and passengers on the Toronto subway who supplied me with invaluable data for this study.

Avis (1972) discusses the distribution of eh in British, Canadian and American English. He points out that 'eh?' is no Canadianism--for it did not originate in Canada and is not peculiar to the English spoken in Canada. Indeed, eh appears to be in general use wherever English speakers hang their hats; and in one form or another it has been in general use for centuries. On the other hand, there can be no doubt that eh? has a remarkably high incidence in the conversation of many Canadians these days. Moreover, it seems certain that in Canada eh? has gained such recognition among Canadians that it is used consciously and frequently by newspapermen and others in informal articles and reports (see footnote 19) and attributed freely in reported conversations with all manner of men, including athletes, professors, and politicians' (Avis 1972, 95).

¹What follows is a capsule statement of Austin's theory of speech acts, and as such, tends to oversimplification. For a full discussion, see Austin 1962.

²An example of a semantically ambiguous sentence would be 'Flying planes can be dangerous'. This sentence can have two quite different meanings in two different contexts, but constitutes an act of asserting in either case.

³There has been extensive discussion of this phenomenon in recent linguistic literature. See, for example, Gordon and Lakoff (1971), Heringer (1971), Sadock (1974).

⁴One class of speech acts which permanently excludes eh is the class of official pronouncements and declarations. No one would ever seriously say, 'I pronounce you man and wife, eh?'. There are several clear reasons for this. First and foremost, it is never appropriate in ritual situations of an official capacity to express uncertainty that the felicity conditions on the relevant speech acts have been fulfilled. Normally, very exact specifications are set out concerning what counts as a pronouncement in a culture, and these are institutionally upheld. Secondly, particles such as eh are features of an informal speaking style; they serve to mediate human relations at a highly personalized level. Official pronouncements are restricted to very formal styles, in which language and relationships are highly ritualized. Thirdly, official pronouncements in general contain explicit performative verbs ('I dub thee...', I baptize thee...', 'I crown thee...'), and eh never occurs with explicit performatives, even in an informal style. No one says, 'I offer to go first, eh?' or 'I suggest we leave, eh?'. One reason is that eh performs no useful function once the performative verb has been named. A deeper reason is the fact that in using an explicit performative, a speaker is not only performing a particular act (whose felicity conditions are questioned by eh), but also mentioning that he is performing the act. The presence of eh in these sentences questions not only whether the act was such that the addressee will comply, but also whether the act has been performed at all. Clearly, it does not make sense to mention that you are performing an action, and at the same time ask if you have performed it.

⁵The unity of offers and promises as a class of speech acts is discussed in Ross (1970).

⁶When discussing 'polite' and 'impolite' speech forms, there is always the complication that people may use polite forms without meaning them sincerely. Thus, it is quite possible to say 'Let's climb the CN Tower, eh?' in a bullying manner, just as it is possible to say please with a rude request, like 'Shut up, please'. In these cases, additional situational factors override the 'politeness' of what has nevertheless originated as a politeness device in the language.

⁷More oblique insults might make effective use of eh by implying that what is being asserted should already be shared knowledge. But in general, direct insults are merely weakened by this particle.

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